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ABSTRACT

In response to requests for information from people and organizations all over the United States on how to contribute to the healthy development of young children, the Families and Work Institute has gathered concrete suggestions from leaders in diverse fields into this booklet of action tips. This effort was undertaken to support the "I Am Your Child"/Early Childhood Public Engagement Campaign, and is part of a series of community mobilization tools and materials published by the Families and Work Institute. Some of the tips are simple and practical, geared to immediate results and designed to be acted on right away. Others are broader in scope and require more sustained effort. The tips can be used in a variety of ways: they can be localized, to include names and contacts of specific local programs or resources, and they can be shared in a variety of formats, for example mass media, targeted mailings, and community meetings. Tips are targeted at such groups as: (1) architects, developers, and the building trades; (2) businesses; (3) civic, community, and professional organizations; (4) colleges and universities; (5) faith communities; (6) government; (7) hospitals and health care professionals; (8) law enforcement; (9) libraries; (10) media; (11) parents and families; (12) philanthropy; (13) schools; (14) seniors and retirees; (15) service providers; and (16) youth. (EV)

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Introduction

Americans are "doers," as so many observers of our nation have noted. As more of us become better informed about the opportunities and risks of early childhood, we want to do something. But what?

How can individuals in various walks of life can contribute to the healthy development of America's young children? What actions will help strengthen communities on behalf of young children and their families?

In response to requests from people and organizations all over the nation, the Families and Work Institute has gathered concrete suggestions from leaders in diverse fields. This effort was undertaken to support the *I Am Your Child*/Early Childhood Public Engagement Campaign. *Early Childhood Action Tips* is part of a series of community mobilization tools and materials published by Families and Work Institute.

Some of these action tips are simple and practical. They are geared to immediate results and can be acted on right away. Others are broader in scope and require more sustained effort. They seek change over the long haul. Any of these suggestions can be adopted—or adapted—or used to spark creative thinking about how to improve early childhood programs and services in your state or community.

How to use the tips

These tips can be used in a variety of ways. They can be localized, to include names and contacts of specific local programs or resources, and they can be shared in a variety of formats. For example, you may want to:

- Reprint some or all of the tips in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, professional journals, in conference materials and on product and service ads and packaging.
- Share the tips in a variety of formats, such as radio or TV public service announcements, as bookmarks, cards, mail inserts, magnets, flyers, posters, or as "ads" on bus and subway signs or on milk carton and shopping bag panels.
- Use the tips as overheads or handouts, or along with targeted mailings to various audiences on the importance of early childhood issues.
- Use them to spark discussion at community meetings, or in response to the question, "What can I do to help young children and their families?"
- Provide the tips to local media to use as sidebars for early childhood stories.
- Challenge community groups to develop additional action ideas.

Architects, Developers and The Building Trades (Contractors, Carpenters, Electricians, Painters, Plumbers, etc.) can:

- Assess the condition of playgrounds and facilities currently used for early childhood programs according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission's National Standards for Playground Safety.
- Volunteer to repair or renovate early childhood playgrounds and facilities.
- Design and build low-cost early care and education and family center facilities.
- Use non-toxic building materials.
- Encourage clients in public spaces to include rooms for parent classes and meetings, areas for mothers to nurse their infants and early care and education facilities in workplaces, parks, housing and commercial developments, and other public places.
- Include instruction about early childhood facility design and construction in architecture schools and building trades training and apprenticeship programs.
- Publish articles in professional journals about the importance of the early years and how a wide range of individuals and groups in the building trades can make a difference.

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Businesses and Other Employers can:

- Work with media to publicize local programs that offer parent education, family support, early care and education, and health services.
- Inform employees about the importance of the first years of life and provide parenting information using a wide variety of communication vehicles, such as bulletin boards, in-house newsletters, electronic networks, or literature in paycheck envelopes.
- Provide employees with family insurance coverage that provides such health services as prenatal and maternity care, well child and mental health care and immunizations.
- Learn about best practices in the work/family arena.
- Conduct surveys or focus groups to learn about employees' needs.
- Create an internal task force to study needs.
- Underwrite some of employee child care costs.
- Review policies and practices to consider how to become more supportive to families, and whenever possible offer flexible work schedules and telecommuting options.
- Inform the public about the importance of the early years on company ads, promotions and products.
- Sponsor community parenting seminars or family support groups at the workplace.
- Invite local speakers to offer parenting seminars at work sites.
- Honor and reward employees who volunteer to provide or improve early childhood programs and services.
- Offer employees access to online parenting information and resources at work.
- Serve on community planning and improvement committees.
- Share expertise (such as accounting skills, management training, public relations, etc.) with early care and education programs, health and family support programs and volunteer to serve on their boards.
- Provide in-kind support, such as copying, faxing, mailing or printing to local early childhood health, education and care, and family support programs.
- Communicate concern about the importance of the early years to policymakers.
- Work with other community partners (United Way, service providers, government, media, philanthropy, faith communities, schools, libraries, unions, etc.) to expand and improve health services, early care and education, and family support/parent education programs for families with young children.

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Civic, Community and Professional Organizations can:

- Educate members and the public about the importance of the first years of life.
- Collect and publish information about state and local early childhood needs and resources.
- Organize referral services and/or help lines for families with young children.
- Host or co-sponsor community forums on early childhood topics, such as early childhood brain development, parenting programs that work, improving the quality of child care, or expanding access to health care.
- Help local service providers design services that are sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs and preferences of their communities. Help providers recognize and eliminate obstacles that may prevent segments of the community from using their services.
- Organize volunteers to build or refurbish neighborhood playgrounds or improve child care facilities.
- Organize volunteers to work in early childhood programs, mentor young children, or read stories to children in libraries, early education settings, and hospitals.
- Celebrate and honor state and community leaders and organizations that are making a difference for young children and their families.

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Colleges and Universities can:

- Create campus parenting and child care programs for students and staff, and ensure that their facilities are safe and inviting for young children and their parents and caregivers.
- Establish curricula that encourage family-centered and collaborative practice among educators, health and family education and support professionals.
- Gather faculty and students across various disciplines and departments to share resources and research, and develop interdisciplinary programs and courses related to early childhood.
- Encourage faculty to make early childhood a focus of their research.
- Take active part in efforts—local, regional, and national—to raise the qualifications of individuals providing services for young children and their families.
- Provide courses and education programs for child care providers and other early childhood service providers at convenient times and places.
- Help evaluate the quality of local and regional early childhood services.
- Learn how other colleges and universities are supporting the healthy development of young children and replicate promising practices.
- Encourage and support students, faculty and staff to perform volunteer service in early childhood health, education and care, and family support/parent education programs.

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Faith Communities can:

- Share information about the importance of the first years of life from the pulpit.
- Include parenting books in the congregation's library.
- Celebrate families raising young children.
- Sponsor or donate space for parenting, family support, health care, and early care and education programs.
- Adopt a local early childhood program, offering financial support and other resources, the use of facilities, and/or volunteers from your congregation.
- Include information about healthy early childhood development in professional training and education programs for clergy and lay leaders, hospital chaplains, and seminary students.
- Mobilize retired and senior congregation members to volunteer in hospitals, early care and education programs, at libraries and at family centers.
- Organize parenting classes and provide child care to parents who attend.
- Encourage older members to "adopt" or "mentor" young families.
- Establish community-wide interfaith councils of child and family ministries that focus on the needs of new and expectant parents. If this kind of council exists in your area, become an active participant.
- Assure that family and community representatives are involved in designing any services developed to serve them.
- Inform the public about the importance of the early years and about local resources available to assist families with young children.

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Government (at all levels) can:

- Increase investments in young children and their families, tying new investments to research on effective policies and practices.
- Create incentives for other organizations, in the public and private sectors, to expand and improve services to families with young children.
- Require ongoing collaboration and coordination among agencies that administer early childhood programs and services.
- Collect and share data about the needs of young children and their families.
- Document and share information on the cost and effectiveness of programs serving young children and their families. Benchmark the results of these efforts.
- Convene groups of citizens to address early childhood issues.
- Convene a group of business leaders to investigate how to finance early childhood programs and services.
- Institute appropriate quality-control mechanisms to assure the safety and healthy development of young children in early childhood programs, and provide technical assistance to those who need to improve quality.
- Provide low- or no-interest loans to early childhood programs that have plans to improve quality or undertake facility construction and renovation.
- Establish tax advantages for family-friendly businesses.
- Support research that holds promise for improving results for young children and their families.

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Hospitals and Health Care Professionals can:

- Educate families, patients and staff about the importance of the first years of life, early brain development, and the importance of every child having a primary health care provider or "medical home."
- Work with community-based organizations, the media and early childhood professional organizations to promote and provide immunizations and health exams for young children.
- Provide expectant and new parents with information about maternal health, including mental health.
- Provide facilities and materials for prenatal and parenting classes, early care and education programs, and other services that support healthy early childhood development.
- Collaborate with other community partners to expand and improve locally available health, parenting and family support and early care and education programs.
- Inform policymakers about the importance of the first years of life, and support laws and policies that increase and improve health, parenting, family support and early care and education programs.
- Volunteer as telephone or on-site consultants to early childhood programs on health and safety issues.
- Use professional journals, conferences and meetings to inform peers about key issues in early child development, including new research on brain development.

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Law Enforcement can:

- Inform other members of the law enforcement community, and the public at large, about the importance of the first years of life and the wisdom of prevention.
- Develop a vision of law enforcement that regards family support and parent education, voluntary home visits, and other services to families with young children as crime prevention strategies; share this vision with the public.
- Promote public policies and legislation designed to assist families with young children and prevent child abuse.
- Collaborate with other community partners (such as schools, health care providers, early care and education programs, and family support/parent education programs) to expand and improve services to families with young children.
- Include information about relevant issues in early child development, as well as child abuse prevention and intervention, in training programs for all law enforcement professionals. Train police officers to work collaboratively with social workers, health care providers, and other professionals who interact with young children and their families.

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Libraries can:

- Publicize the importance of the first years of life.
- Become an information source about all community, child and family activities and initiatives.
- Publicize the availability of special collections of parenting materials as well as resources and books for young children.
- Provide meeting space to community groups working to improve the quality and availability of programs and services that support families with young children.
- Sponsor or host parenting and family literacy classes.
- Offer family literacy programs in early care and education and family resource centers and other community settings.
- Encourage families to read to their children beginning at birth and throughout childhood.
- Establish family reading rooms for other community groups.
- Hold story times for the youngest children and their caregivers.
- Help parents gain access to on-line resources about parenting and child development.
- Share on-line library services with early childhood program.

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Local Government can:

- Develop legislation, public policies, budgets, taxes, and financing mechanisms that assist families with young children.
- Include programs and facilities for young children and their families in parks and in recreation and senior services departments.
- Use planning and zoning data about children and families to create appropriate regulations and facilities (parks, sidewalks, child care centers, family child care homes, housing, etc.).
- Link economic development and job creation with initiatives that meet the needs of young children and their families.
- Collaborate with community partners such as other local governments, schools, and non-profit organizations to expand and improve programs and services for young children and their families.
- Develop model programs.
- Advocate for young children and their families with county, state, and federal governments.
- Encourage the education of the people who provide services for young children, through scholarship funds and other strategies.
- Work with county, state, and federal regulators so that municipal regulations on fire, safety, and buildings are the same and/or complementary when applied to facilities for young children.
- Link maternal and child health, immunizations, and other child health and development resources with other programs and services for young children and their families.

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Media can:

- Create and broadcast programming that informs the public about the importance of the early years.
- Create an early childhood "beat."
- Report on state or local efforts to expand and improve programs and services that assist families with young children.
- Organize and/or participate in state or local early childhood community efforts to improve the lives of young children and their families.
- Document positive aspects of the lives of families with young children.
- Publicize local resources available to families with young children.
- Report on state and community early childhood champions—individuals, organizations and businesses who are improving programs and services for young children and their families.

Parents and Families can:

- Acquire the skills and tools they need to become forceful advocates for their children.
- Learn more about early childhood development, including early brain development.
- Join and form parent support organizations.
- Speak out to the media and at public hearings about the needs of children and families.
- Talk with legislators and elected officials, call radio talk shows and write letters to the editor about early childhood needs and issues.
- Support and mentor other families.
- Attend courses and read parenting education materials.
- Ask for help when needed.

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Philanthropy can:

- Provide long-term support for early childhood system development efforts.
- Fund, sponsor and convene community mobilization efforts to expand and improve the quality of programs and services available to young children and their families.
- Initiate and participate in partnerships with other sectors that improve and expand programs and services for young children and their families.
- Fund projects that demonstrate or replicate successful early childhood projects.
- Fund public awareness efforts.
- Provide low- or no-interest loans for quality-improvement efforts by early childhood programs, including renovation of facilities.
- Inform policymakers about the importance of the first years of life, and about local needs and conditions as well as ways to improve the quality and coordination of services for young children and their families.
- Form funding partnerships with peers to leverage or generate new resources for early childhood programs and services.
- Use funding programs creatively to meet a wide spectrum of needs experienced by families with young children.

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Schools can:

- Inform all school personnel and parents about the importance of the first years of life. Make this information available, to the greatest extent possible, to parents who are not fluent in English.
- Build partnerships with neighborhood early childhood programs and create effective transition programs from early childhood programs to schools.
- Incorporate information about parenting and child development, including new insights into early brain development, into the curricula of various content areas at all grade levels.
- Offer voluntary parent education programs, such as Parents as Teachers, HIPPY and family literacy programs.
- Provide programs that help teen parents finish school and learn parenting skills.
- Collaborate with other community partners to expand and improve services that assist families with young children.
- Include information on early childhood development in school libraries.
- Include early care and education and family center facilities in new school construction projects and reallocate vacant classrooms for such programs, when available.
- Offer indoor and outdoor space to early childhood program facilities.

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Seniors and Retirees can:

- Volunteer to read to young children at libraries, hospitals, schools, early care and education programs and family resource centers.
- Volunteer to assist community organizations, agencies, and programs serving young children and their families.
- "Adopt" or mentor young families.
- Use their language skills to help recent immigrants gain access to services for their young children.
- Serve on the boards of non-profit organizations that provide programs and services for young children and their families.
- Learn and share information about early childhood development, including brain development.
- Talk with legislators and elected officials, call radio talk shows, and write letters to the editor about early childhood needs and issues.

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Service Providers in a wide range of fields (health care, family support/parent education, early care and education, child welfare, etc.) can:

- Educate families, staff and the public about the importance of the first years of life. Make a concerted effort to reach those who are not fluent in English or are isolated from the community by geographic, cultural, social, or economic factors.
- Involve a wide range of families and community members in designing and evaluating programs and services.
- Collaborate with other service providers and community partners on an ongoing basis to expand, coordinate, and improve early childhood programs and services. Share newsletters, sponsor shared staff training or develop new projects together.
- Make facilities safe and inviting for young children and their parents and caregivers.
- Enhance the quality of the early childhood services through staff development, national accreditation, and ongoing evaluation and improvement efforts.
- Participate in community efforts to define and improve the quality of services for young children and their families.
- Establish or contribute to "one-stop" resource centers to link families with appropriate services.
- Make collaborative efforts to help parents identify and seek early assistance for young children with disabilities.

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Youth can:

- Take seriously the vital contribution they can make as role models for their younger brothers and sisters and other young children in their neighborhoods.
- Volunteer to read to younger children at preschools, in family child care homes, in libraries, at church, school, family centers or in hospitals.
- Work through youth service groups (Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Campfire, Girls and Boys Clubs, 4H Youth Development Groups, Kiwanis, settlement houses, etc.) to volunteer at area early care and education, health and parenting, and family support programs.
- Photograph, draw, paint or sculpt young children and their families for community awareness exhibits and activities.
- Learn about early childhood development.

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